

MIAMI TODAY

Miami Today is an independent voice of the community, published weekly at 2000 S Dixie Highway, Miami, FL 33133. Telephone (305) 358-2663

The hell with the public, commission says in charter votes

Why would anyone help review Miami-Dade County's charter?

Members of this year's review team spent months hearing evidence, carefully deliberated and thoughtfully recommended changes that the county commission last week trashed.



Michael Lewis

But before trashing the proposals, commissioners had also trashed the task force from the dais for both its ideas and for absenteeism.

Why any task force member ever showed up is the mystery.

Commissioners had pledged beforehand to let voters decide on every item the review team proposed by a two-thirds vote.

They broke their pledge. They decided that it was only valid if they got proposals they'd wanted anyway. The hell with the voters.

Nor did they vote on most other task force recommendations. Of the 16, only a handful even made it to last week's agenda. Only three were OK'd to go to voters, and one merely would clean up charter wording.

The commission didn't ignore a bunch

of renegades, either. Commissioners themselves handpicked most of the review team.

It's not as though the review was some whim, either. The charter itself – the county's equivalent of a constitution – requires it every five years.

It's simply that what the team recommended was never destined to be taken seriously by commissioners who run the county as 13 fiefdoms and brook no interference – especially from taxpayers and voters.

The fact is, most of the 20 charter team members were safe choices. There were no loose cannons with scatterbrain ideas. These were thoughtful citizens who made very, very moderate recommendations.

They didn't dare tread on landmines by suggesting such major changes as number of commissioners, at-large election of some, separating mayoral and managerial powers, commission dealing with contracts, slush funds and other vital topics.

No, they stuck to fixes in a system that they would leave unaltered. But the commission wanted none of it – and refused to let the voters have their say, though a public vote is the route to a charter change.

Commissioners even ignored the sane proposal to raise their \$6,000 pay for

full-time work – a level set in 1957. But higher pay might also draw more candidates, and commissioners detest opposition.

The rejection of almost every meaningful proposal – and the alteration of one to ease municipal incorporations – says nothing about the judgment of the charter review team and everything about irresponsibility of commissioners who can't even keep their word about what they will let voters decide.

As some commissioners noted in debate, they had promised. But they had their fingers crossed. And besides, a commission promise is only good for 24 hours – if that long.

So what about 20 people who wasted time giving the county the best advice they could muster that they really believed the commission would let voters act on?

Would you join them in public service when you'd be criticized for your judgment, told you hadn't given enough time to study – although the commission had limited your work to three months – and then be ignored as commissioners put on the ballot their own self-serving proposals?

Look at one by Esteban Bovo for a straw vote on barring tax use to fund services and projects "from companies actively doing business with state spon-

sors of terrorism."

That referendum is pandering at best, a lightly veiled attempt to help friends win lucrative county contracts at worst. Can you say Miami International Airport?

Setting foreign policy at the county rather than federal level is fraught with peril and potential lawsuits.

Besides, who exactly would decide which states sponsor terrorism? Do we make the list by commission vote when a key county contract is in the wings?

Would global corporations invest here knowing that seven commissioners on a whim could rule that a land where some branch of the corporation had ever done any business sponsored terrorism? Unlikely.

But forget potential conflict with federal policy and sure danger to our own economy. Commissioners passed this time bomb 11-0 as they refused to even consider key charter issues.

In a nation 90 miles south of Florida decent people once refused to be involved with a morally corrupt government. The result was Fidel Castro.

In Miami, decent people have tried to be involved with government, at commission invitation, only to be chastised and their ideas ignored. We can repay commissioners for their disdain for voters at the next election.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Turn ballot fraud probe over to US attorney

The recent arrest of an absentee ballot handler for alleged fraud throws a shadow of doubt on the casting of absentee votes and by extension the elections where these so-called "bolateros" were employed.

Most absentee ballots are collected and cast in an appropriate manner, but in elections where absentee votes play an outsized role these ballots can decide a runoff or whether a candidate wins or loses.

Bolateros are ballot hustlers who feed off the votes of our elderly and others on the margins who gather at community kitchens known as comedores or neighborhood senior centers. They procure votes for whoever is paying them, and the will of the voter is not their primary concern.

I believe the state's investigation into absentee ballot fraud should be turned over to the US attorney because federal prosecutors and judges are appointed and presumably would be less susceptible to influence than local officials who depend on elections to get into office. The use of bolateros may be in violation of the Federal Voting Rights Act, and mail fraud certainly falls under federal purview.

We must now act to bring integrity back into our elections. Follow the grand jury finding of years past and require witness signatures for absentee ballots. And vigorously prosecute bolateros who perpetrate fraud.

We have sacrificed the sanctity of our vote for convenience. Now is the time to stop taking voting for granted.

Marc D. Sarnoff

City of Miami Commissioner

We don't like what future holds for our children

I worry about the future – not mine, but that of my three children, all in their 20s.

It is an axiom of American folklore that every generation should live better than its predecessors. But this is not a constitutional right or even an entitlement, and I am skeptical that today's young will do so.

Nor am I alone. A recent USA Today/Gallup poll finds that nearly 60% of Americans are also doubters. I meet many parents who fear the future that awaits their children.

The young (and I draw the line at 40 and under) face two threats to their living standards.

The first is the adverse effect of the Great Recession on jobs and wages. Even if this fades with time, there's the second threat: the costs of an aging America.

It's not just Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid – huge transfers from the young to the old – but also deferred maintenance on roads, bridges, water systems and power grids.

Newsweek calls the young "generation screwed"; I prefer the milder "generation squeezed."

Already, batteries of indicators depict the Great Recession's damage. In a Pew survey last year, a quarter of 18- to 34-year-olds said they'd moved back with parents to save money.

Getting a job has been time-consuming and often futile. In July, the unemployment rate among 18- to 29-year-olds was 12.7%. Counting people who dropped out of the labor market raises that to 16.7%, says Generation Opportunity, an advocacy group for the young.



Robert Samuelson

Among recent high-school graduates, unemployment rates are near half for African-Americans, a third for Hispanics and a quarter for whites, notes the Economic Policy Institute, a liberal think tank.

The weak labor market hurts even jobholders. From 2007 to 2011, "real" (inflation-adjusted) wages fell nearly 5% for recent college graduates and 10% for recent high-school graduates, says EPI.

Among college grads, only four in 10 said their jobs required a four-year degree, reports a survey by the John J. Heldrich Center at Rutgers University. If the economy doesn't fully recover, slack labor demand will continue to depress employment and wages for years.

Of course, generalizations can be overdone. Countless millions of young people are doing – and will do – fine. History can't be predicted. The mass retirement of baby-boom workers may create job scarcities and raise wages.

Still, some setbacks will endure. Some skills that would have been learned on the job won't ever be. Life decisions are deferred. Among 18- to 29-year olds, the weak economy is causing 18% to postpone marriage and 23% to delay starting a family, reports a survey by Generation Opportunity.

And then there are the costs of aging. Gains in productivity – from new technologies or better skills – that would normally flow into paychecks will be siphoned off to pay for retiree benefits, underfunded state and local government pensions and infrastructure repair.

Taxes will rise; if not, public services will fall. Or both. Population change can't be repealed. The ratio of workers to retirees, 5-to-1 in 1960 and 3-to-1 in 2010, is projected at nearly 2-to-1 by 2025.

It's often said that today's young will

ultimately benefit from this lopsided tax-and-transfer system. Old themselves, they will be similarly subsidized by their young.

Doubtful. Sooner or later, the system's oppressive costs will become so obvious that future benefits will be curbed. Chances are the young will still pay for today's elderly without themselves receiving comparable support.

As a parent, all this rattles me. We judge our success by how well our children do. We love them and want them to succeed, even if most of us recognize – at some point – that our ability to influence and protect them has expired.

Peering into the unfathomable future, we don't like what we think we see. We're dispatching them into a less secure and less prosperous world.

These parental anxieties, I think, are the presidential campaign's great, unacknowledged issue. Many voters will decide based on a calculus of which candidate would minimize the economic perils for their grown children.

MIAMI TODAY
miamitodaynews.com

FOUNDED JUNE 2, 1953
VOLUME XXXIX No. 14
ENTIRE CONTENTS © 2012

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MIAMI TODAY (ISSN: 0191-2295) is published weekly for \$125 per year; annual to Europe \$190 per year, the Americas \$140 per year. Published by Today Enterprises Inc., 2000 S. Dixie Highway, Suite 100, Miami, Florida 33133, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Miami, FL. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to MIAMI TODAY, 2000 S. DIXIE HIGHWAY, SUITE 100, MIAMI, FLORIDA 33133.